



Expanding Access to No-Cost School Meals Will Boost Health and Learning For Maryland Students

Position Statement Supporting Senate Bill 769

Given before the Budget and Taxation and Senate Environment, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

In times of uncertainty and increased economic anxiety in Maryland households, reducing the financial strain on low-income families would be a significant relief. Expanding access to free school meals would improve health and education for Maryland children. **For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports SB 769.**

School meal programs are a critical resource that provide children with the nutrition they need to thrive academically, physically, and emotionally in both the short and long term. SB 769 would create more hunger-free schools in Maryland by supporting high-poverty schools and school districts in providing school meals at no cost to all their students through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

School meals play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fueled up and ready to learn. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$57,000 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

Community eligibility is a proven solution to this issue. This federal program allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students, including in over 670 Maryland schools – reaching over 370,000 students across the state. Research has shown that CEP schools experience a range of benefits, including: increased meal participation, reduced stigma for students, elimination of school meal debt, and improved staff morale. Additionally, students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate.

Despite these benefits, not all schools are able to use CEP because of limitations in the current federal reimbursement structure. Establishing a state CEP supplement would help make the program financially sustainable for more schools. This \$10 million per year investment from the state could help up to 200 additional schools opt into CEP and offer breakfast and lunch to the over 90,000 students attending those schools.

Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to a number of benefits:

- Improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function;
- Improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement;

- Reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes;
- Improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk;
- Improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression.

With the cost of living rising and more families struggling to meet basic needs, expanding the number of CEP schools in Maryland would be a game-changer for many students and their families. SB 769 would be an important steppingstone in Maryland's journey towards Healthy School Meals for All, helping to reduce hunger, improve student health and academic performance, and ease the financial burden on families already facing challenges. **For these reasons, we respectfully ask the Committee to make a favorable report on SB 769.**

Equity Impact Analysis: Senate Bill 769

Bill summary

SB 769 establishes a state Community Eligibility Program supplement which would help make the program financially sustainable for more schools. This \$10 million per year investment from the state could help up to 200 additional schools opt into CEP and offer breakfast and lunch to the over 90,000 students attending those schools.

Background

Too many children in need are left out due to the current school meals program structure. To qualify for free school meals, a student's family must be living at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, which translates to annual income of less than \$34,000 for a family of three for the 2024–2025 school year. Because the eligibility threshold for these programs are so low, many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs do not qualify.

Equity Implications

Policies in the past have led to a system of unequal opportunities for marginalized groups within Maryland. Although the most obviously racially discriminatory policies have long been overturned or mitigated, the impact of these policies continue to persist in both society and public policy and have led to significant racial and health disparities. Families with children, Marylanders of color, and people with disabilities are all more likely to qualify for and need food assistance programs because of these barriers. Children of color experience much higher rates of economic insecurity and poverty and are more likely to benefit from expanded access to school meals.

Impact

Senate Bill 769 would likely **improve racial and economic equity** in Maryland.